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ABSTRACT

Nonprofessional personnel can play an important role in the classroom as teacher aides, especially in a bilingual situation where a particular language background can prove invaluable in developing language skills among the students. The presence of a teacher assistant increases the opportunities for individual instruction. Potential teacher aides can be found within the local community, and training programs and workshops organized within the school system can prepare them for the classroom situation; an organized, extended training schedule could help some advance to the point of becoming fully-qualified teachers. (VM)

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Para-Professionals: Their Role in ESOL and Bilingual Education

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Presentation given by Hernan LaFontaine
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at the 1971 TESOL Convention in
New Orleans, Louisiana

In recent years, the introduction of non-professional personnel into the schools and the classrooms has created considerable controversy. Advocates claim that the additional assistance derived from para-professionals can be the greatest blessing to the overworked teacher. Opponents fear that employment of auxiliary personnel may be opening the door for the implementation of sub-standard instruction in the classroom. In other words, some people are still trying to decide whether para-professionals are a help or a hindrance. I've made my decision already and I'm here to state unequivocally that the use of educational assistants may be one of the most significant approaches in our attempts to provide individualized instruction. Especially in English as a Second Language and Bilingual Education programs do we see a very clear need to have another adult assisting the teacher in the many personalized activities demanded by these programs.

This afternoon, I would like to focus on some of the reasons underlying the need for utilizing para-professionals, how these assistants can function effectively in a classroom, their role as part of the overall teaching team and some of the factors involved in the recruitment and training of assistants. Since most of this presentation is based on my experiences with the para-professionals employed at the Bilingual School, I will, of course, be referring to them quite often.

Before I begin, however, I would like to make a simple clarification regarding the distinction that has been made in the title of this presentation between English as a Second Language and Bilingual Education. I added "bilingual education" to the original title first because I am deeply interested and involved in bilingual education, but also as a reminder that the concept of second language instruction (as opposed to foreign language instruction) has been extended through bilingual education to many languages other than English. In New York City, of course, most of the bilingual programs include Spanish as the vernacular language, but they also offer Spanish as a second language for the

English speaking children. I mention this point because it has bearing on one reason why we must look towards utilizing para-professionals in the instructional process.

With the establishment of many new bilingual programs in the city, we have seen a recurrent problem facing administrators and school boards when considering personnel needs. Many principals and superintendents claim that a major obstacle to the initiation of a bilingual program is the critical shortage of qualified bilingual teachers. This problem, of course, is not one which can be overcome overnight and efforts to recruit large numbers of Spanish speaking teachers must continue and be expanded tremendously. However, while this is being done, we should be engaging in a far greater effort to employ community persons who already are proficient in both English and Spanish and who, with proper training, can be of great assistance to the few teachers that are available. Incidentally, when I say "few teachers", referring to the situation in New York City, please understand that this is a gross understatement. It becomes a lot clearer when we note that there are approximately 500 Puerto Rican teachers in the New York City school system out of a total of about 60,000 teachers. This amounts to less than 1% of the total staff while the number of Puerto Rican students in the schools reaches close to 250,000, or about 22% of the total pupil population.

So we see that there is an urgent need to provide a massive influx of Spanish speaking personnel into positions offering direct contact with out Puerto Rican children. The recruitment of para-professionals may be the most immediate way to accomplish this purpose. Their role in providing ethnic models with which children can identify should not be overlooked either.

At the same time, these assistants can be utilized very effectively to provide instruction in Spanish as a second language to English speaking students.

Secondly, there is the ever-present concept of individualized instruction which automatically means a greater demand on the teacher's time and energy to provide for the needs of all her students. In spite of all the programmed in-

struction materials and other so-called self-learning programs, we cannot deny that having another adult in the classroom is the most logical and reasonable approach to providing greater individualization of instruction.

Finally, if we are seriously concerned with increasing the number of minority group teachers and encouraging community participation in education, then we must certainly view the concept of the para-professionals as a most viable and productive alternative.

The actual role of the para-professional in the classroom can be as diversified and challenging as that of the teacher. The range of activities possible for an educational assistant may vary from those which essentially are non-instructional and serve mainly to provide the teacher with more actual teaching time to those which virtually convert the assistant into a second teacher with real instructional responsibilities. Thus, you would find at P.S. 25, assistants helping children with outer clothing, keeping attendance records, preparing materials, duplicating materials, supervising the lunch period, and undertaking a host of other necessary tasks. The same assistants will, at another time during the day, be reading to a small group of students, helping an individual pupil with arithmetic problems, playing games with a few children, showing slides and listening to students discuss the slides and, in general, carrying out a number of educational activities while the teacher is engaged with the rest of the class.

Because of the heavy emphasis on language instruction in our bilingual program, many of our assistants spend a great deal of time working with pupils in English as a first or second language and Spanish as a first or second language. The program in second language instruction especially creates many situations in which assistants can work with small groups of students or individual pupils in helping to develop their listening and speaking skills. The assistant may be reinforcing a specific oral pattern which the teacher has just taught or, perhaps, playing a game involving numbers they have just learned/

More advanced pupils or classes may get assistance from the para-professional in reading and writing skills sometimes through the use of programmed materials. The fact that all of the assistants are bilingual is especially significant because both English speaking and Spanish speaking students can be given the benefit of the assistant's extra attention. In addition, in many instances, the para-professional brings to the classroom a wealth of language experiences in Spanish which the teacher may not possess. Children's songs, games, stories and poems which the assistant may recall fromher own childhood now become an integral and exciting part of the curriculum. In general, the net effect is that there is now another person in the room with whom children can communicate and thus practice and further develop their language skills.

Needless to say, a good educational assistant doesn't just walk in from her kitchen at home and, with the proper blessing from the principal, start to diagnose pupils' reading deficiencies. It is a long and arduous task to develop a group of para-professionals who can make a positive contribution to a school program and function as part of an overall instructional team.

First, we must consider how we're going to select these individuals and where we're going to get them from. Since one of the underlying justifications for employing para-professionals is to encourage participation of community residents in education, it is natural that our major source should be the immediate school neighborhood. Highest preference should be given to parents of children in the school since there is really no other group which could have a greater stake in developing the best instructional program possible. If necessary, additional persons could be recruited from local civic groups, community agencies, adult education programs and community colleges. Occasionally, individuals with teaching experience but without all the necessary requirements for certification as teachers here, may move into the community from other countries and can certainly be employed very effectively as assistants in a special category.

Whatever the source may be, the prospective assistant should have a sincere desire to work with children and should have an understanding of the problems

they face at home and in the neighborhood. They should, of course, possess the basic skills in the fundamental subject areas, but not necessarily be required to have a complete formal educational background. A high school diploma would be helpful, but again not essential if the person demonstrated satisfactory ability. If the program is a bilingual program, it would be extremely desirable that assistants be bilingual. And if these assistants are going to work with non-English speaking children, it would be virtually mandatory that they speak the vernacular of the children. Another significant factor is that assistants, just as teachers, spend a good part of their time working with adults, as well as with children, and, therefore, they should be able to relate well to other adults and understand the importance of cooperating in a well-coordinated team effort.

Assuming that we have found this "super-assistant" with all of these fine qualities, we still have only begun. Now, the task is one of giving this person the training necessary to develop all of the skills which will make her an asset to the teacher. Ideally, there should be an opportunity to provide the para-professional with some pre-service orientation and training. During this period, the assistant should become acquainted with the key personnel in the school, with the physical plant, with the important resources in the community, and with the children. Some time should be devoted to an explanation of the duties of an assistant and the general role she will play in the program. Once the assistant is assigned to a specific teacher and class, she should understand that she will be getting specific help through an organized program of in-service training. This aspect of the para-professional's career is extremely important and definitely deserves the greatest attention. In too many cases, the assistant is given a book and told to work with a group of children, very often the slowest children, and that is virtually the last contact the assistant and the children have with the teacher for the rest of the semester. I cannot ever-emphasize the frustration and even fear that the assistant will experience upon discovering that suddenly she has assumed the awesome responsibility of teaching children without

knowing what to do. Unfortunately, the more dangerous problem is that the children themselves will be neglected and will suffer all the evils of poor teaching.

In-service training may take many forms but, basically, the kind of training that the school can provide is generally the most relevant and, therefore, should be undertaken immediately. A typical week at P.S. 25 might include a workshop on Monday afternoon for all educational assistants. This session is conducted by a master teacher who coordinates and supervises the work of all the assistants. The topics may range from classroom organization, to discipline to mathematics. One of the early workshops this particular year was on the use of a commercially developed reading program which we had purchased. In cooperation with the assistant principal, the coordinator had arranged for teachers to utilize this program, in their classes. Once the assistants had received several sessions on how to use the materials, they began to work with small groups of children in their classes. During this time, the coordinator met with each one of the assistants individually and then, together, with the classroom teacher. In addition, the classroom teacher was making specific plans regarding which children to assign to the assistant and in helping the assistant plan for her instructional duties. Of course, the teacher and the assistant meet daily to assess the progress of the children and to assess the assistant's progress as well. It may seem as if a great deal of extra time and energy has to be expended just to serve a few children but the fact is that for some of the children, time spent with the assistant may be the only time in the whole day that they receive any kind of special attention.

The general direction of the training program is one in which para-professionals are given basic background information, factual information related to specific subject areas, skills needed for their own development and other skills needed to teach their children. As the assistant comes more in contact with the coordinator, the assistant principal, the teachers, other assistants and other staff members, she gradually develops better skills and, of course, becomes more confident. It

is certainly a wonderful feeling for a supervisor to observe an assistant undertaking interesting and productive work with children and to know that everyone is benefitting from it; the children, the assistant and the teacher.

The training can continue on a mor e long term basis outside of the school. Several of our assistants participate in courses provided through special programs designed to offer career opportunities for assistants. The Career Ladder Program, the Career Opportunities Program and the Career Training Program, although funded from different sources all have the goal of providing time and money for assistants to continue their education. In addition to the released time and the tuition free courses, para-professionals have the incentive of being advanced through various stages of job categories based on additional training. It will soon be possible for an individual to start in a school as a school aide not working in a classroom and gradually occupy the following titles: teacher aide, educational assistant (H.S. diploma), educational assistant (2 years college), educational associate, teacher intern, bilingual professional associate. Hopefully, the ultimate goal would be to see some of our assistants become full fledged teachers. However, another possible expectation might be that, as community persons become school staff members and as they become more aware of the real problems and needs of children, they might be more instrumental in urging and actually getting greater community and parent participation in educational matters of real significance. Already we are beginning to see in New York City that a number of Community School Boards include persons who at one time were working as para-professionals in schools over which they now exercise considerable influence.

In other words, community people can become vital members of the total educational team at all levels. However, if we refer to a team, teachers and principals must understand that this means undertaking a task through a cooperative and dynamic effort. Unfortunately, there are still some who resist having another adult in the room, especially a "community person". There are fears of being spied upon or being exposed to unwarranted criticism. In reality, the para-professional coming to work in a classroom is probably just as afraid and nervous as to what the

teacher's perception of her may be. And every para-professional I've seen was very eager to learn her job. So that both the assistant and the teacher are in a perfect position to help each other cross the bridge into the other's world. If we can welcome the para-professional on board as an important member of a team doing a significant job, we might be on our way towards strengthening the relationship between schools and communities into real partnerships.